Memphis Flyer

"This Is It"

THE MAJESTIC GRILLE OPENS FOR BUSINESS.

by Andy Ashby

The Majestic Grille is a hard restaurant to define. Its menu has a grilled cheese sandwich across from quality steaks. Its tables have white linen covered by paper tablecloths. Its décor is understated, yet there's an eclectic rotation of bossa nova and funky jazz playing in the background.

These contradictions, however, might be what make the 10,000-square-foot bar and grill at 145 S. Main work. Owners Patrick and Deni Reilly come from different backgrounds too, but they've worked to create a classy meeting place with room for everyone.

Patrick, originally from Ireland, has worked in restaurants in London, New York, Chicago, and Florida. Before starting up the Majestic, he worked nearby at Swig, the martini bar.

Deni, who hails from New Jersey, has been involved in the hospitality industry for a long time, working at hotels or as a meetings planner.

"My skills and his skills blend well, and that's why it works," Deni says.

The building that houses the restaurant was constructed in 1912 as the Majestic No. 1 movie theater. It's easy to imagine how it looked back then, with the mezzanine above the front door taking the place of a projection booth. Original railings surround the second floor.

Warren Jordan, whose father owned the theater, gave the Reillys a photo taken of the property in 1920. The picture features the theater's employees and a young Jordan. The Majestic Grille's staff recreated the photo and included the 88-year-old Jordan in the same spot he stood all those years ago.

The Majestic No. 1 operated until 1936. Then Julius Lewis Men's Shop moved from Beale Street to the site and operated until the 1950s. The building opened again in the 1970s as Blue Light Studio. It entered its restaurant days about 10 years ago. That's when Breckenridge Brewery came in and installed beer-making equipment, now covered by a mural at the back of the restaurant. Breckenridge gave way to another brew pub, Gordon Biersch, which in turn closed a couple years ago, making way for the Majestic Grille.

"Conceptually, it's a 1940s bar and grill, an old- fashioned, nice American restaurant," Patrick says. The Majestic Grille seats 220 inside, with room for 50 more on the front patio along the trolley line. The food is straightforward, with a variety of big salads, hamburgers, steaks, seafood, and pasta. "It's not meant to be complicated," Patrick says. "There are no fusions here."

Cooks prepare a meal for employees from 3 to 5 p.m. each day. The night crew comes in early to eat, while the day crew sits after a hard day of work. While this might not be the way staff breaks are handled at most Memphis restaurants, it's a high-end style of management.

"It's just the way it is," Patrick says. "Everybody sits down and breaks bread. It's crazy to work in a good restaurant if you can't eat."

That philosophy extends to other areas.

The Majestic Grille offers its employees health insurance and is setting up a 401(k). It also requires that staff have direct deposit. It makes for a stable work environment.

"We want this to be a career, not just a fly-by-night job," Deni says. "We want people to have a good place to work where they can earn some money but also learn things along the way. We want them to have the same passion about this that we do."

The interview process is lengthy. Prospective employees meet with three or more managers, with at least one of them a supervisor. Hired applicants then train on everything from wine selection to service.

If it sounds like a lot of work, it is. But it's been worth it so far.

Deni recalls the restaurant's first Saturday night. There was a party of 30 on the mezzanine, the bar was full, and every seat in the house was occupied. The lights and music were perfect. Patrick and Deni had been at the restaurant all day. Still, they enjoyed the controlled chaos in front of them. Remembers Deni: "We sat in the back and said to ourselves, 'This is it. This is our restaurant.'"